

Message Text

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E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, IS, SY, LE

SUBJECT: SHIHABI DISCUSSES SYRIAN INTENTIONS IN LEBANON

REF: DAMASCUS 8016

1. SUMMARY: SHIHABI SAYS SYRIA, TO ACHIEVE ITS TASK OF ENFORCING SECURITY THROUGHOUT LEBANON, MUST DEPLOY ITS FORCES TO ALL DANGER POINTS, INCLUDING SOUTHERN PORT OF TYRE. IT SEEKS NO TROUBLE WITH ISRAEL. IT WILL NOT URGE FEDAYEEN TO RESUME CROSS BORDER ACTIONS. IT WANTS LEBANESE BORDER AREA TO BE QUIET. SYRIA NOW MILITARILY WEAKER THAN BEFORE IT DEPLOYED ITS TROOPS IN LEBANON. AFTER DEPLOYMENT COMPLETED, SYRIAN FORCES IN ADF WILL PURSUE COUNTRY-WIDE DISARMAMENT. END SUMMARY.

2. SHORTLY AFTER TRANSMISSION REFTEL, I RECEIVED MESSAGE FROM ARMY HEADQUARTERS THAT COS SHIHABI WOULD SEE ME AT 1730L TODAY. HAVE JUST RETURNED FROM NEARLY TWO HOUR DISCUSSION WHICH FOCUSED PRINCIPALLY ON LEBANON. (APPOINTMENT WAS OSTENSIBLY IN RESPONSE ROUTINE REQUEST FOR MEETING I HAD SUBMITTED ON RETURN FROM WASHINGTON CONSULTATIONS. AS DEPARTMENT AWARE, HOWEVER, DESPITE MY SEVERAL REQUESTS I HAVE BEEN UNABLE SEE SHIHABI, FOR REASONS NEVER MADE EXPLICIT, SINCE LAST JUNE WHEN WE MET IN CONNECTION KIDNAPPING/ASSASSINATION OF AMBASSADOR MELOY.)

3. OPENED BY CONGRATULATING SHIHABI FOR WHAT APPEARED

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TO BE EFFICIENT DEPLOYMENT OF SYRIAN ELEMENTS OF ADF

IN LEBANON. SAID IT REFLECTED CREDIT ON SYRIAN LOGISTICAL ARRANGEMENTS AND ON DISCIPLINE OF SYRIAN TROOPS. SHIHABI SAID THAT HE WAS PROUD OF HIS MEN, NOTING THAT THROUGHOUT DIFFICULT CIRCUMSTANCES SURROUNDING ORIGINAL SYRIAN INTERVENTION IN LEBANON LAST JUNE, AND EVER SINCE, HE HAD NOT HAD A SINGLE DEFECTOR. SYRIA HAD GONE INTO LEBANON TO RESTORE SECURITY AND WANTED TO WITHDRAW ITS FORCES AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE. SYRIAN TROOPS WERE NOW DEPLOYED FROM TRIPOLI IN THE NORTH TO THE ZAHRANI REFINERY JUST SOUTH OF SIDON PORT. THIS DEPLOYMENT HAD BEEN ACCOMPLISHED WITHOUT INCIDENT. THE SYRIANS WOULD NEXT MOVE FURTHER SOUTH TO OCCUPY TYRE PORT, THEREBY CLOSING DOWN THE LAST MAIN ARMS SUPPLY ROUTE FOR THOSE WHO OPPOSED SARKIS AND THE ARAB SUMMIT DECISIONS.

4. SHIHABI NOTED HE HAD BEEN LISTENING TO ISRAELI BROADCASTS WARNING AGAINST SYRIAN ENTRY INTO THE SOUTH. I SAID ISRAEL SEEMED VERY DISTURBED ABOUT APPROACH OF SYRIAN ARMY TO SOUTH AS WELL AS ABOUT YESTERDAY'S ROCKET ATTACK ON NAHARIYA. HOWEVER, IT WAS NOT MY MISSION TODAY, ANY MORE THAN IN THE PAST, TO CONVEY A WARNING. OVER PAST MONTHS WE HAD SOUGHT IN OUR TALKS WITH BOTH SYRIANS AND ISRAELIS TO SHARE OUR BEST ASSESSMENT OF EACH OTHER'S ATTITUDES INCLUDING WHERE WE SEE ELEMENTS OF RISK. SAID IN THAT SPIRIT I WOULD APPRECIATE HIS THOUGHTS ON HOW SYRIA COULD TAKE ISRAELI CONCERNS ABOUT SOUTH LEBANON INTO ACCOUNT. AS HE KNEW, ISRAELI SUSPICIONS ABOUT SYRIAN INTENTIONS WERE OF LONG STANDING. STATEMENTS AT RIYADH AND CAIRO TO THE EFFECT THAT THE CAIRO ACCORDS WOULD BE RESPECTED QUITE UNDERSTANDABLY CAUSED THE ISRAELIS FURTHER CONCERN. THE CAIRO ACCORDS, AS WE UNDERSTOOD THEM, INCLUDED PROVISION OF FREEDOM FOR FEDAYEEN ACTION, VIRTUALLY A HUNTING LICENSE, IN THE ARQUB AREA. AFFIRMATION THAT SYRIA AND THE OTHER ARAB COUNTRIES WOULD ENFORCE THE CAIRO ACCORDS, IMPLIED REOPENING WHOLE SORRY HISTORY OF FEDAYEEN INFILTRATION AND ISRAELI REACTION. SHIHABI RETORTED THE CAIRO ACCORDS HAD NEVER BEEN HONORED BY THE PALESTINIANS. IT WAS "A SMALL TACTICAL STEP" FOR THE ARAB STATES TO HAVE ANNOUNCED THEIR DETERMINATION TO SEE THOSE ACCORDS IMPLEMENTED. BUT TO PROVOKE AN ISRAELI REACTION THROUGH PUSHING FEDAYEEN BACK INTO ACTION WOULD WORK AGAINST SYRIA'S INTENTIONS IN LEBANON.

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5. CONTINUING, SHIHABI NOTED ALL DEPENDED ON WHETHER ISRAELI CONCERN WAS A SHORT-TERM ONE ABOUT STABILITY ALONG THE BORDER, OR A LONGER TERM ONE OF BUILDING UP THEIR POLITICAL GAINS ACHIEVED BY THE "GOOD FENCE" POLICY. THESE WERE TWO VERY DIFFERENT QUESTIONS. SYRIA DOES NOT WANT TROUBLE WITH ISRAEL; THE ISRAELIS CAN TAKE THAT AS A GIVEN. HAD IT SOUGHT TROUBLE, DAMASCUS COULD HAVE

ORGANIZED THIS FROM ITS HOME GROUND, FOR EXAMPLE, BY REFUSING TO RENEW UNDOF. SYRIA WAS MILITARILY FAR WEAKER TODAY BECAUSE OF THE DEPLOYMENT OF ITS TROOPS IN LEBANON THAN IT WOULD HAVE BEEN HAD IT KEPT THESE MEN AT HOME. THEY HAD BEEN TAKEN FROM AREAS LONG CONSIDERED VITAL TO SYRIA'S OWN DEFENSE. INsofar AS ISRAEL'S GOO FENCE POLICY IS CONCERNED, THIS COULD BRING LONG-TERM BENEFITS TO BORDER STABILITY BUT ONLY IF INTEGRATED WITH RENEWED MOMENTUM TOWARDS A GENERAL PEACE. SYRIA'S JOB WAS TO ESTABLISH AND MAINTAIN A FIRM CEASE-FIRE THROUGHOUT LEBANON. IT WOULD NOT THROUGH ITS MILITARY EFFORT, AND SINGLE HANDEDLY, RESOLVE THE DEEPER ROOTED AREA PROBLEMS WHICH HAD BURST OUT IN LEBANON.

6. I RECALLED NEWS AFTER THE CAIRO SUMMIT THAT SYRIA HAD DISPATCHED UNITS OF THE PALESTINIAN HITTIN BRIGADE INTO THE SOUTHERN BEKAA. HERE WAS ANOTHER SIGNAL WHICH THE ISRAELIS COULD INTERPRET AS A DELIBERATE STEP TOWARDS RESTORATION OF "FATAH LAND." SHIHABI REPLIED THAT "AT TIMES CERTAIN TACTICAL STEPS HAD TO BE TAKEN WHOSE PURPOSE WAS NOT PERHAPS CLEAR TO OTHERS." THE HUNDRED MEN IN QUESTION FROM THE HITTIN BRIGADE WERE RESPONSIVE TO SYRIAN DISCIPLINE. (HE THEN IMPLIED THEY COULD ALSO PLAY A ROLE IN DISCIPLINING WOULD-BE TROUBLEMAKERS IN SOUTHERN LEBANON.)

7. I ASKED IF SYRIA HAD CONSIDERED WHETHER USE OF NON-SYRIAN ELEMENTS OF THE ADF MIGHT BE PREFERABLE IN SENSITIVE AREAS SUCH AS SOUTHERN LEBANON. SHIHABI REPLIED, CATEGORICALLY NO; "IT WOULD BE FAR TOO EASY FOR THE PALESTINIANS TO PLAY TRICKS ON NON-SYRIAN TROOPS AND EVADE THEIR CONTROL."

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8. SHIHABI SAID THAT ONCE DEPLOYMENT TO TYRE AND OTHER AREAS WHERE A SYRIAN PRESENCE MAY BE REQUIRED TO ESTABLISH SECURITY HAD BEEN ACCOMPLISHED, THE ADF WOULD MOVE TO COMPLETE COUNTRY-WIDE DISARMAMENT OF LEBANESE AND PALESTINIANS. IT WOULD BEGIN WITH CONFISCATION OF HEAVY WEAPONS SUCH AS TANKS AND HOWITZERS, THEN SWEEP UP HEAVY MACHINE GUNS AND ROCKET GRENADES, ENDING UP BY CONFISCATING EVEN PISTOLS. HE WAS CONVINCED THAT THIS STEADY PROCESS OF DISARMENENT WAS ESSENTIAL TO MAINTAINING ORDER AND CONFIDENT THAT SYRIA COULD EXECUTE THE JOB.

9. I SAID IT WAS TOO BAD SYRIA COULD NOT BE AS EXPLICIT IN PUBLIC ON THESE QUESTIONS AS HE HAD BEEN WITH ME. SHIHABI SAID THIS WAS OBVIOUSLY IMPOSSIBLE. HE FELT, HOWEVER, THAT ALL PARTIES AND "PARTICULARLY THE ISRAELIS WHO ARE

FAR FROM NAIVE" RECOGNIZED SYRIA WAS DOING A JOB
IN LEBANON BENEFICIAL TO AREA PEACE. HOWEVER HE REITERATED,
SYRIA COULD ONLY HOPE TO MAINTAIN CEASE-FIRE IN LEBANON,
IT COULD NOT SOLVE THE DEEP ROOTED AREA CONFLICT. FOR THIS
THE ACTIVE PARTICIPATION OF THE USG IN THE SEARCH FOR A
GENERAL PEACE WAS INDISPENSABLE.

10. COMMENT: I CONSIDER IT PROBABLY SHIHABI HAD ASAD'S
PRIOR APPROVAL TO RECEIVE ME. HE AT NO POINT SUGGESTED HE
WAS PROVIDING A MESSAGE FOR US TO PASS TO THE ISRAELIS
BUT WAS CLEARLY INTENT ON SECURING OUR UNDERSTANDING OF
SYRIAN INTENTIONS IN LEBANON.

11. SUGGEST PASS BEIRUT AND TEL AVIV.
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